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MY FIRST DAY AT PRAIRIE VIEW

By Inez Schneider Whitney

My introduction to formal education was my first day at Prairie View, District 56, a one-room school in Western Oklahoma near present-day Custer City. Holding tightly to Papa's hand, I walked beside him down the dusty road. Mama had combed my red hair in two long braids, put on my hair ribbons, and tied my best sunbonnet under my chin. I was proud of the new percale print dress that Mama had just finished the day before.

Prairie View stood on the corner of Papa's farm a short distance down the road. It was September, 1912. I had just turned six. The thought of being away from home frightened me.

"Don't make me go to school," I had kept telling Papa. "Oh, you'll like it," he would say. "A lot of your friends will be there."

The playground was crowded. Boys and girls ranging in age from six to their late teens were

racing everywhere. Like me, all of them were barefoot. When the weather began to get cold, everyone would start wearing shoes. Money was scarce, and letting their children go barefoot was one way for the parents to economize. Like me, the other girls had on homemade dresses and sunbonnets, and the boys wore blue bib overalls and wide-brimmed straw hats.

Some of the older boys had tied a rope to the seat of the broken

recitation bench and were pulling it around and around in a circle. They were yelling, "Who wants the next ride?"

"Don't you want a ride?" someone called to me. "No," I said and held Papa's hand all the tighter. "Oh, look; there's Renie," Papa said and pointed to Lorene Buntley, a neighbor girl I often visited.

She came running over to us and grabbing my hand said, "Come on, Inez. Let's play tag."

Off we went. "Oh what fun," I thought. I forgot



ART BY KATHY SCHMIDT

"Money was scarce, and letting their children go barefoot was one way for the parents to economize."

"She lifted me onto her lap and started picking the sandburrs out of my feet."

all about Papa; and a little later when I went to look for him he was gone.

"Renie, I don't see Papa," I sobbed. "Don't cry. He's probably gone home. Big people don't go to school. Listen! Mr. Varner's ringing the bell. We have to line up and go inside."

What else could I do? In we went, and Renie found a small double desk near the front of the room.

"See. We'll be seatmates," she said. I don't remember much about that morning except I thought it would never end. As Papa and I left, Mama had said, "We live so close, you can come home for your lunch." That had helped persuade me to go.

Finally, noontime came. When we were dismissed, I started running right down through the field. What a terrible time I had! The sandburrs stuck in my bare feet. How they hurt! Then I kept tripping over the cornstalks and falling down. Mama heard me crying long before I reached home; she came to meet me.

"What a sight you are! You're all dusty and so dirty!" She lifted me onto her lap and started picking the sandburrs out of my feet.

"Why did you come through the field? Why didn't you go out and come down the road?"

"I didn't think about it," I said. She cleaned me up, gave me lunch, and then walked me back to school.

"Now," she admonished, "this afternoon, come down the road. You can walk with Opal Tennison."

That afternoon I reached home safely. A few days later I asked, "Mama, will you fix my lunch in syrup bucket like Renie's mama does? Then I can stay all day and have fun playing at noon."

That's what she did, and from that time on I spent all day at Prairie View.

So I had my introduction to many years of educational efforts at Prairie View, District 56, which will always be a vivid memory for me. ❧

(INEZ SCHNEIDER WHITNEY--now of Arlington, Virginia, and formerly of Custer City--is in her eighty-third year on earth and in her tenth year as a loyal supporter of the WESTVIEW effort.)